

## A Kantian Reading of the Picture of Dorian Gray

### *Kantçı Bakış Açısıyla the Picture of Dorian Gray*

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**Abstract:** *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) manifests the aesthetic perception of Oscar Wilde in terms of a choice between objective reality and subjective sensing. Wilde privileges the subjective over the objective modes of experience since he believes in the power of knowing through impulses. The novella continuously calls for the intuitive world of pleasure through subjective experience. In this world of detached reality, Dorian experiences the world non-purposively through subjective sensing. Non-purposive experience coincides with Immanuel Kant's concept of disinterested free beauty which is perceived subjectively as discussed in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Hence, free beauty and the way of knowing through the senses in Kantian terms seems to be the model for Wilde's protagonist as Dorian's judgements arise spontaneously. Such purposeless perceptions dominate Wilde's novella and Dorian's world of senses as aesthetic pleasure becomes a necessary supplement for Dorian's life. Within this scope, this study aims to elucidate Kant's theories in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) as reflected in Wilde's novella. However, Kant's idea of a mutual agreement between rationally knowing and subjectively sensing seems to be disregarded by the novelist, as Wilde perceives reality and objectivity as antagonists. It is with this critique in mind that I have pursued the aesthetic aspect of Wilde's novella. In this respect, this paper attempts to analyse Wilde's sensing the world as opposed to knowing it. Taking from Kant's judgement, Wilde's attempts to separate two ways of knowing is elucidated through the depiction of inner and outer spaces, Dorian's attachment to his portrait and artistic objects, and detachment from reality as exemplified by the deaths of Sibyl Vane, the actress and, Basil Hallward, the artist.

**Keywords:** Wilde, Kant, *Dorian Gray*, Aesthetics, Objective Reality, Subjective Sensing

**Öz:** *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Oscar Wilde'in estetik algısını göstermekte ve Wilde'in nesnel ve öznel algı arasındaki seçimini ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Wilde dürtüler vasıtasıyla edinilen bilgilerin gücüne inandığı için öznel deneyim otonomisini kurarken nesnel gerçekliği yok eder. Kısa romanı sürekli olarak öznel deneyimlerle sezgisel bir zevk dünyası arayışındadır. Gerçeklikten uzaklaştığı bu dünyada, Dorian dünyayı öznel deneyimlerle bir amaç gütmekten deneyimler. Dorian'ın bu deneyimi Immanuel Kant'ın *Critique of Judgement* (1790) adlı kitabındaki duyularla algılanan başka bir şeye bağlı olmayan güzellik kavramıyla örtüşmektedir. Bu sebeple Kant'ın bağımsız güzellik kavramı ve duyular yoluyla bilme teorisi, Dorian'ın dünyayı algılayış şekliyle örtüştüğünden Wilde'in romanında örnek alınmış gibi görünmektedir. Estetik nesnelere alınan keyif Dorian'ın hayatı için zaruri olmaya başladıkça, belli bir amaç gütmekten duyularla karara varma Wilde'in kısa romanında ve Dorian'ın duyularla algıladığı dünyasında baskın olmaktadır. Bu makale bu çerçevede Kant'ın *Critique of Judgement* (1790) kitabında savunduğu teorilerini Wilde'in kısa romanında görüldüğü şekliyle açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Ancak Kant'ın rasyonel bilme ve öznel algı arasında oluşturduğu uzlaşma kısa romanında Wilde tarafından göz ardı edilmiş gibi görülmektedir çünkü Wilde gerçek ve nesnellik düşman olarak algılamaktadır. Wilde'in kısa romanının estetik duruşu bu mantıkla araştırılacaktır. Bu çalışma, Wilde'in dünyayı bilmek yerine hissetme tercihini analiz edecektir. İç ve dış mekânların romanda temsili, Dorian'ın portresine ve sanatsal nesnelere bağlılığı ve aktris Sibyl Vane ve sanatçı Basil Hallward'ın ölümleri ile örneklendirilen gerçekten uzaklaşma çabaları temel alınarak Wilde'in iki farklı algılama yöntemi irdelenecektir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Wilde, Kant, *Dorian Gray*, Estetik, Nesnel Gerçek, Öznel Algı

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Oscar Wilde's novella *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) offers an understanding of the world in terms of subjective experience as opposed to the objective one. In the opening pages Wilde makes clear that factual knowledge is left out in his story as the artist's studio is separated from the "dim roar of London" (5). Wilde distances his setting from the dark realities of London for it is associated with the bitter consequences of the Industrial revolution and the Victorian period. Instead Wilde highlights a full-length portrait in the middle of the studio, the inspiration for his theories on the concepts of the beautiful, arts, and pleasure. Under the influence of Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian Gray retires into highly ornamented interiors and consumes beauties in a different way. The experience undertaken by Dorian is purely subjective; ignoring the dark realities and facts of the outer world while elevating minute details and pleasures. The novella continuously calls for the intuitive world of pleasure. While the scents and colours of flowers, the smell and taste of a cigarette, perfumes of nature, chants of singing birds, texture of silks and linen, and carefully chosen antique objects stimulate Dorian Gray's senses, they overwhelm his understanding of the world at the same time. In this world of detached reality, Dorian experiences the world non-purposively. Non-purposive experience coincides with Immanuel Kant's concept of disinterested free beauty which is perceived subjectively. Free beauty in Kantian terms seems to be the model for Wilde's protagonist as Dorian's judgements arise spontaneously. Such purposeless perceptions dominate Wilde's novella and Dorian's world of senses as aesthetic pleasure becomes a necessary supplement for Dorian's life. Within this scope, my study aims to elucidate Kant's theories in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) as reflected in Wilde's novella. However, Kant's idea of a mutual agreement between rationally knowing and subjectively sensing seems to be disregarded by the novelist, as Wilde perceives reality and objectivity as antagonists. It is with this critique in mind that I have pursued the aesthetic aspect of Wilde's novella. Together with his lectures and essays written between the 1880's and 1890's, Wilde's sensational novel explores and discusses the relationship between beauty, art, life and morality to a broader extent. In this respect, this paper attempts to analyse Wilde's sensing the world as opposed to knowing it. Taking from Kant's judgement, Wilde's attempts to separate two ways of knowing will be elucidated through the depiction of the inner and outer spaces, Dorian's attachment to his portrait and artistic objects, and detachment from reality as exemplified by the deaths of Sibyl Vane, the actress and, Basil Hallward, the artist.

Oscar Wilde's enthusiasm for aestheticism stretched beyond his famous novella *The Picture of Dorian Gray* extending to his public lectures and performances as an aesthete. His lectures, especially on beauty and art in Britain and USA made him a celebrated figure. In addition, a series of essays written in the 1880's and 1890's such as "The Critic as Artist" and "Decay of Lying" articulate his version of aesthetics. Yet, Wilde's lasting literary fame came with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where he establishes his aesthetic appreciation dominated by senses. Wilde separates the objective real world from the subjective since he believes in the power of knowing through impulses (Wilde 1972, 60) rather than knowing through rational capacity. Indeed, Wilde was not the first writer in English literature to experiment with the senses. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) is the herald of this tradition. Stevenson's Mr Hyde is the empowerment of the primitive side of the human completely motivated by impulses. The fight between rational knowledge and instinctual desires suggest the duality and fragmentation of the modern man. In 1895, H. G. Wells followed Wilde in his *The Time Machine*. His novella offers an alternative form of aestheticism based on sensation. Caroline Hovanec argues that the aestheticism of Wells's novella "stems from a transformation of his empiricist vision. From scientific observation Wells strips away epistemological authority, leaving in its place a kernel of sensation that provides not evidence

*but aesthetic experience*" (459). Similar to Wilde, Wells's fiction is based on subjective perception questioning scientific observation. Stevenson, Wilde and Wells create a modern experiment by offering the effect of sensual knowledge in the field of objective knowledge. In such a reading these writers seem to be the first modernists in the Victorian period, as Havoc puts it "*high modernists were not the first writers to question the link between seeing and knowing*" (Havoc 461).

Knowing through subjective sensing as opposed to the objective one is of course not original to Wilde. At the end of the eighteenth century, when neoclassicism was giving way to Romanticism, Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) established the facts of human aesthetic responses to an object. According to Kant the beauty of a work of art exists in the eye of the beholder, so it has no ethical ends and is free of collective and universal functions. Indeed it is "*self-subsisting*" (Kant 72) and self-reflexive as exemplified in Dorian's experiences where Wilde puts beautiful things at the centre. In Kant's argument nothing is inherently beautiful but it is the human response that makes it so. Focusing on the responses of the consumer, Kant indicates that the human response is a genuinely aesthetic one. The consumer sees no interest in the object of beauty but enjoys a pure delight. In this way Kant separates "*the Beautiful*" both from the logical and the good. On this dogmatic and somewhat Romantic basis the whole burden of what is to be judged beautiful and aesthetically valuable falls upon the consumer.

Kant's theory of beauty had a great impact on later theorists who connected beauty to the value of art. Marcia Muelder Eaton argues that "*At the end of the twentieth century, increasing numbers of aesthetic theorists and practitioners are persuaded that beauty does matter in art*" (11). As Kant disconnects the value of the aesthetic from the artist he seems modern. By deemphasizing the artist Kant separates the art from any criteria that the artist proclaims. As an advocate of freedom in artistic creation Kant echoes the Romantics. His thoughts had an appeal to the American New Critics of the 1930s and also on French criticism. Yet, academic evidence for Kant's influence on Wilde is limited. Wilde's biographer Richard Ellmann writes that during his Oxford years besides Plato and Aristotle he enjoyed reading "*Kant, Hegel, Jacobi, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, and Mill*" (41). It is possible to say that reading Kant as a requirement of a course might have initiated Wilde's interest, as traces of Kant's theories are seen in his novella and critical writings. The only comparative study claiming a connection between Kant and Wilde is Jonathan Loesberg's article "*Kant's Aesthetics and Wilde Form*". A comparative reading of Kant's and Wilde's theories of natural and aesthetic beauty, on morality and art Loesberg's article connects Wilde's ambiguous trial to his "*perverse desires, a connection that enriches both aesthetic theory and our understanding of the cultural significance of his trial*" (79) and argues that "*the misreading of Wilde had led to his expulsion from the Kantian line*" (94).

Further, in Kant's discussion, truth can be anticipated autonomously by experiencing the world non-conceptually and non-purposively (Kant 58). In this disinterested experience Kant excludes all moral considerations from purely aesthetic judgement. According to Kant, the non-purposive end is also related to reason where objective and subjective experiences mutually work to build up our modes of judgement (Kant 59-60). Wilde privileges the subjective over the objective modes of experience whereas Kant moulds them into a coherent whole to reach the ultimate truth. Although Wilde seems to have taken from Kant's theories to some extent, his idea of a mutual agreement between rational and subjective experience seems to be disregarded by the novelist, as Wilde perceives reality and objectivity as antagonists. Wilde's novella could be read in this perspective as it establishes the autonomy of subjective experience based on

Kant's ideas but disregards the objective and intellectual realm.

Kant's philosophy enables us to experience the world non-purposively since subjective judgement lacks any ethical or social purposes. The aesthetic experience retains the significance of an interaction with the beautiful which involves purposiveness without purpose. Similarly, Wilde in the Preface articulates his version of art as non-purposive. Art exists independently from any social or ethical concerns for Wilde as "*All art is quite useless*" (4). Aesthetics is higher than ethics; "[e]ven a colour-sense is more important in the development of an individual than a sense of right and wrong" (Wilde 1972, 63) and "*creative faculty...springs from too primitive, too natural an impulse*" (Wilde 1972, 60). In this way what Wilde creates in the novella becomes a complete detachment from the real world as factual objective knowledge is separated from the subjective one. This is Wilde's attempt to understand the world. With his reactionary personality it can be read as a challenge to the conventional social novels and the strict moral values of the nineteenth century. In the first Chapter of the novella Dorian's mentor Lord Henry argues that it is possible to cure the soul by senses which could only be accessed through subjective experience (21) and Dorian develops and promotes a taste for the beautiful, fanciful and fashionable objects following his senses. He needs pleasure giving objects which can reinforce a subjective experience. Wilde's taste for the beautiful privileges beauty over thought and Wilde separates beauty from the thought as follows;

*...Beauty is a form of Genius- is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation...It cannot be questioned. It has its divine right of sovereignty...People say sometimes that Beauty is only superficial. That may be so. But at least it is not so superficial as Thought is (22).*

Wilde's definition of beauty coincides with Kant's concept of beautiful which involves purposiveness without purpose. Yet, Wilde develops his own discussion between beauty and thought and extends the argument onto the relationship between art and ethics. Loesberg points to the connection between Wilde and Kant as far as the concept of disinterestedness, beauty and art is considered:

*To get to the deepest connection between Kant's and Wilde's theories, we can start with a connection that is fairly obviously Kantian, even if it seems paradoxical in Wilde's formulation. Wilde's dictum about the difference between morality and art, which caused him trouble at his first trial, of course, comes directly out of Kant (Loesberg 81).*

Wilde's critical essay "*The Critic as Artist*" carries the same argument onto the relationship between art and perception as follows; "*Art...addresses itself, not to the faculty of recognition nor to the faculty of reason, but to the aesthetic sense alone*" (Wilde 1972, 30). Subordinating rational perception to the sensual, thought is perceived as the outcome of rational knowing and dubbed as superficial whereas a beautiful object perceived only as an impression is called genius. Thus, Wilde argues that objective knowing is harmful to artistic objects since "*beauty of a work of art may be marred...by any excess of intellectual intention*" (Wilde 1972, 28). Kant's definition of beauty does not offer such a distinction between beauty and thought but the definition of "*free beauty*" coincides with Wilde's definition given above; "*There can be no objective rule of taste by which what is beautiful may be defined by means of concepts. For every judgement from that source is aesthetic, i.e. its determining ground is the feeling of the Subject, and not any concept of an Object*" (Kant 75). Kant describes designs, pictures and interior decorations as self-subsisting beauties which please freely on their own account. They

are nothing but patterns of “*free beauty*” which allow our judgement to arise spontaneously as the taste for beautiful is the only disinterested and free delight that does not require any approval (Kant 49). Free from any meaningful or useful relation to pleasure as well as from any prior or mimetic form, “*free beauty*” provides Kant’s argument with an idealized aesthetic space: “...*designs a la grecque, foliage for framework or on wallpapers, &c., have no intrinsic meaning; they represent nothing-no Object under a definite concept-and are free beauties*” (Kant 72), and we like them (Kant 49). Such purposeless inclination towards free beauties makes these objects of pleasure in ways distinct from the things we like because they are good or useful. “*Free beauty*” in Kant’s terms makes objects desirable or pleasurable for the consumer without any purpose and use (Kant 46-50). On this somewhat Romantic argument the whole responsibility for the judgement of beautiful and aesthetic falls upon the consumer.

“Kant’s concept of purposelessness is reinterpreted by Wilde associating art as something “*quite useless*” as he puts it in the Preface (3). Actually, the Preface articulates Wilde’s version of art for art’s sake. The aesthetic experience retains the significance of an interaction with the beautiful which involves purposiveness without purpose. Just like Kant, Wilde excludes the moral and ethical considerations related with the artistic object and art. For aesthetic experience attained through subjective judgement lacks any ethical or social purposes (Kant 79). According to Wilde art should exist for itself, away from ethical concerns and realism since “*[a]n ethical sympathy in an artist is unpardonable mannerism of style*” (3). In this context when Lord Henry and Dorian enjoy the pleasure of the beautiful objects they assert an individual subjective perception. This personal judgement claims Kantian universal knowledge acquired through subjective experience. In Kant’s argument:

*There can, therefore, be no rule according to which any one is to be compelled to recognize anything as beautiful. Whether a dress, a house, or a flower is beautiful is a matter upon which one declines to allow one’s judgement to be swayed by any reasons or principles. We want to get a look at the object with our own eyes, just as if our delight depended on sensation. And yet, if upon so doing, we call the object beautiful, we believe ourselves to be speaking with a universal voice, and lay claim to the concurrence of everyone, whereas no private sensation would be decisive except for the observer alone and his liking (Kant 56).*

Personal judgement is an aesthetic one only if it is “*disinterested*”, free of any interests, needs or uses. A free judgement then leads to a universally accepted or understood one. Wilde follows Kant’s argument of the self-subsisting and independent nature of beauty and establishes his argument in the Preface to his novel as “*[a]ll art is at once surface and symbol*” (4). Freeing art from ethics in his novella and critical writings, Wilde claims not only the superiority of beauty over thought but also of form over content. Wilde’s reading of form as the “*beginning of things*” and “*the secret of life*” (Wilde 1972, 57) manifests the significance of appearance and artistic form at large. Furthermore, taking from Kant’s concepts of beauty and subjective knowledge, Wilde not only legitimizes the notion of “*art for art’s sake*” but also welcomes the dominance of formalism in the twentieth century.

With these in mind, Wilde actually paints a chic aesthetic interior space for the artist Basil’s studio. The studio is immersed with “*rich odour of roses*”, “*heavy scent of the lilac*”, “*delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn*”, and “*the sullen murmur of the bees.*” The power of colours and scents are doubled with the oriental atmosphere created by Lord Henry who lies and smokes “*heavy opium-tainted cigarette*” on “*the divan of Persian saddle-bags*”. The “*tussore-*

*silk curtains (oriental moth that produces brownish silk) producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect*” separates the studio from the “*dim roar of London*”. To complete the setting “*the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty*” is located in the centre of the room (5).

The aesthetic enthusiasm of Wilde is deeply felt where the reality of London is left out. Rich decorative details, scents and colours create this exotic atmosphere to distance the reader from the dull and colourless life of London to enjoy the moment. Dorian experiences the scene subjectively where the external world is non-existing as “[*m*]ere colour, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways” (Wilde 1972, 56). Dorian is divorced from social exchange and the physical world as Wilde stimulates an intense aesthetic pleasure he creates through colours, smells and intricate aesthetic objects. In this respect, Wilde’s detailed depictions of interiors and carefully chosen language appealing to the senses claim the Kantian expression of a universal knowledge which is accessible only through subjective means.

Actually Wilde has depicted here a perfectly matching scene to what he asks in “*The Critic as Artist*” to follow. Artists should seek “*the imaginative beauty of... fair colour*” (Wilde 1972, 55) and reject “*the tedious realism*” of the obvious: “*...try to see something worth seeing, and to see it not merely with actual and physical vision, but with that nobler vision of the soul which is as far wider in spiritual scope as it is far more splendid in artistic purpose*” (Wilde 1972, 56). Here, Wilde suggests that objective truth is obvious as it is easily perceived. Yet the aim of art requires a different a mood of the moment, rich with aesthetic experience. Wilde rejects “*tedious realism*” because it is mere copying in the search for creativity.

Wilde is distant to rationally knowing since he believes reason is harmful to senses. He claims that “[*o*]ne should sympathize with the colour, the beauty, the joy of life” rather than mourning for “*life’s sores*” (38). Actually, Wilde is critical towards the doctrines of nineteenth century England. Fuelled by reason and thought, the Victorian Age with its highly esteemed moral values seems to lack what Wilde seeks in life:

*...self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly-that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes to oneself. Of course they are charitable. They feed the hungry, and clothe the beggar. But their own souls starve, and are naked. Courage has gone out of our race (19).*

Here, Lord Henry attacks the moral ideals of Victorian people who use morality to mask self-interest. He even despises the philanthropic people of the Victorian Age who “*lose all sense of humanity*” (34) while trying to feed the poor. Hence, this excerpt voices Wilde’s stance towards his age—a call for rebellion against the religious and moral values that have “*gone bankrupt through an over-expenditure of sympathy*” (38). For Wilde, the highest of all human function is art and individualism. Self-development which can be achieved through developing the senses is more important than the cultivation of the whole society:

*Don’t squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar. These are the sickly aims, the false ideals, of our age. Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Be always searching for new sensations...a new Hedonism-that is what our century wants (23).*

“*[S]earching for new sensations*” as it emphasizes the individual need for pleasure is definitely not the precept of Victorian Age. It even bolsters the category of subjective experience in Kantian terms. In this respect, Wilde does not choose to write like George Eliot, Charles Dickens or Elizabeth Gaskell. He does not follow Matthew Arnold’s advice of cultivating the minds. Wilde actually believes cultivating the mind will degrade the beauty of art and corrupt the artist since art is “*useless*” (4). Favouring beauty over thought from the beginning Dorian chooses to feed his soul by glorifying the senses and appealing to the sensuous world non-purposively. In the search of “*free beauty*” in Kantian terms, Dorian encounters a subjective experience away from realism and the mimetic way of representation since “*[i]t is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors*” (4).

Hence, the external world, especially the depictions of London is restricted to a few scenes at night where Wilde creates a very dark, gloomy, dim and dangerous atmosphere compared to the beautiful interiors arousing sensual pleasure:

*There was an exquisite **poison** in the air. .. I felt that this **grey, monstrous** London of ours, with its myriads of people, its **sordid sinners...must have something in store for me...I went out and wandered...soon losing my way in a labyrinth of grimy streets and black, grassless squares** (45).*

In another instant, Dorian watches “*the sordid shame of the great city*” and passes from the “*rough-paven streets*” where all windows are dark with “*fantastic shadows silhouetted against some lamp-lit blind*” (160-161). Bleak coloured exteriors, recalling the metaphorical darkness of Industrial England, is contrasted with the extremely glorified interiors with attractive colours and scents because Dorian retreats into a subjective experience ignoring the outer world. Wilde connects the real to the ugly and tries to avoid them by elaborating inner space and ignoring the external. For this reason he has separated Basil’s studio from the “*dim roar of London*” (5). Dorian’s reaction to the news of Sibyl’s death in the paper is similar; “*How ugly it was! And how horribly real ugliness made things!*” (110). Similarly Dorian reads the entrance of a servant to such an aesthetically decorated interior as the intrusion of “*[r]eality*” (40) since he wears the “*detestable*” costume of the age (28). According to Lord Henry the costume of the nineteenth century is “*depressing*” (28) and harmful to senses, just like the Victorian Age and its people. Therefore all ugly/real things should be kept at a distance. In Wilde’s world mimetic and realist depictions or reflections are failures. This is why he carries his portrait away after the real changes start to occur and kills the artist. This is why Dorian is carried away from the real life while he watches Sibyl Vane on stage and falls in love with the colours and impressions the actor Sibyl reflects on stage:

*When she came on in her boy’s clothes she was perfectly wonderful. She wore a **moss-coloured velvet** jerkin with **cinnamon** sleeves, slim **brown** cross-gartered hose, a dainty little **green** cap with a hawk’s feather caught in a jewel, and a hooded **coal** lined with **dull red**....Her hair clustered round her face like **dark** leaves round a **pale rose**....She is simply born an artist. I forgot that I was in London and in the nineteenth century (68).*

Wilde captures an intense sensual experience here by the appeal of different colours. Sibyl exists as a “*free beauty*” in front of Dorian. The beauty is now in the eye of Dorian to appreciate. The overwhelming subjective sensing feeds Dorian’s soul as a spectator and the passive spectator becomes active by turning the colour-sense into a subjective experience.

Dorian eventually diminishes the objective reality of Sibyl and enthralled by the mere representation on stage. Art, merely the representation of life on paper, canvas or stage, makes Dorian forget that he is in the “poisonous,” “monstrous” and darkened nineteenth century London. This unreal reflection on stage is not Sibyl for “[o]ne evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen...I have seen her in every age and in every costume. Ordinary women never appeal to one’s imagination...But an actress!”(47). Dorian’s love for Sibyl is alive as long as she is the actress who could prove her existence on stage as Juliet, Rosamond, Ophelia or Imogen. Actually Sibyl acts as a medium for Dorian to enrich his sensual experience: “She is more than an individual” (47), a “free beauty” for Dorian to taste. Dorian believes he has found his wife in Shakespeare’s plays; “Lips that Shakespeare taught to speak have whispered their secret in my ear. I have had the arms of Rosalind around me, and kissed Juliet on the mouth...I have left her in the forest of Arden, I shall find her in an orchard in Verona” (80).

In this disillusion Dorian disregards Sibyl as a real entity and idealizes her merely as an artistic object among his collection of artefacts. It creates an apparent problematic between art and life:

*I love beautiful things that one can touch and handle. Old brocades, green bronzes, lacquerwork, carved ivories, exquisite surroundings, luxury, pomp, there is much to be got from all these. But the artistic temperament that they create, or at any rate reveal, is still more to me. To become the spectator of one’s own life, as Harry says, is to escape the suffering of life (97).*

Dorian not only enjoys free beauties but also the artistic effect of them. He chooses aesthetic judgement and rejects the mimetic representation offered by Sibyl on stage. Thus, the conflict between two ways of knowing culminates in the Dorian-Sibyl episode as art and reality crash. Dorian’s need for individual pleasure bolsters his intense subjective experience and carries him away from the real world. He fancies Sibyl as a form of beauty since form is “the secret of life” (Wilde 1972, 57) whereas Sibyl realizes life exists out of that form. Eventually Dorian chooses to become a spectator of Sibyl’s tragedy when Sibyl touches the reality and destroys his illusion since “life is terribly deficient in form” and “[o]ne is wounded when one approaches” (Wilde 1972, 35). As soon as Sibyl accesses the realm of rational knowledge and perceives art as mere imitation and reflection of life, she refuses to act well and kills Dorian’s romance. Yet, Dorian adores the effect of art and beauty because it is not real. Art and aesthetic effect appeal to senses while mimetic representation gets closer to the realities. In this reading, without her artistic effect Sibyl has no value for Dorian. She diminishes as a work of art and Dorian turns to other artistic objects. As Dorian misinterprets Sibyl’s position in life and on stage he fails to distinguish between reality and representation. Here, Wilde’s intention is to distinguish art from the reality of life. While Wilde claims that art is not life, he craves to see life as art. As Loesberg argues, Dorian’s problem is to “treat life and passion as art rather than trying to make life art by expelling its desires” (87).

Since life is the ugliest of forms according to Dorian, he seems to display an escapist attitude not to be hurt. Upon Sibyl’s death Dorian tells Lord Henry that “[i]t seems to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play. It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded” (89). Dorian is not hurt and even finds delight in the tragedy of Sibyl. Wilde justifies the reason as follows;

*Because Art does not hurt us. The tears that we shed at a play are a type of the exquisite sterile emotions that it is the function of art to awaken.*



*We weep, but we are not wounded. We grieve, but our grief is not bitter...the sorrow with which Art fills us both purifies and initiates...It is through Art, through Art only, that we can realize our perfection; through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence (Wilde 1972, 39).*

In this instance Lord Henry soothes Dorian by telling him that art is not real and Sibyl was just an artistic object or medium through which a beautiful act was performed;

*The girl never really lived, and she has never really died. To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare's plays and left them lovelier for its presence,...The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away. Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died. But don't waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are (92).*

Wilde's argument on the relationship between real life and art is further discussed in "The Decay of Lying". Supporting Dorian's attachment to representations rather than realities Wilde's doctrines of aesthetics are suggested systematically as follows: Firstly, "Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, and develops purely on its own" (Wilde 1961, 35). Secondly, "All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature...As a method Realism is a complete failure... The only beautiful things are the things that do not concern us" (Wilde 1961, 36). Lastly, "Life imitates art far more than Art imitates Life...Lying, telling of beautiful things, is the proper aim of Art" (Wilde 1961, 36-37).

Hence the perception of art in Wilde's understanding is;

*Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into wilderness. This is the true decadence, and is from this that we are now suffering (Wilde 1961, 14).*

Here Wilde sees the intrusion of real life into art as exemplified in the episode of Sibyl and his picture triggering his death because they both become a mirror reflection. While Sibyl mirrors actual life on stage, Basil produces a mere photographic image of Dorian. As Matthew Schulz argues

*Basil's portrait of Dorian captures precisely what is in front of his eyes-Dorian's exact likeness. Wilde's choice of title is another hint towards this reading. That he calls his novel The Picture of Dorian Gray and not The Portrait of Dorian Gray is quite important. This portrait is, in fact, a picture that captures the true nature of Dorian's appearance (Schulz 81).*

Actually Wilde's antagonistic attitude towards realism is due to the mimetic representation of the ugly or bare facts lacking in any creative faculties and impulses. As Basil attempts to imitate

life by creating a mimetic copy of Dorian on canvas, art and the artist fail to create something new and tragedies follow. What Wilde experiments with is a new form of reality based on creation, intuition through subjective perception as exemplified in Dorian's sensual experiences and the portrait.

According to these arguments Wilde celebrates the power of art over life and perceives mimetic and realistic art as bad art. Since realism relies on believable representations perceived objectively, it is rejected by Wilde. Kant's argument on beauty as a self-subsisting entity (Kant 72) is reflected in the first article and carried onto the second and the third where Wilde connects beautiful things with art, but ugliness with reality. Wilde separates art and artistic objects from real life because he fears that reality could harm their beauty. That is why the real Sibyl cannot exist among Dorian's beautiful objects and the portrait has to be hidden and the artist killed. Schulz argues that when life replaces art and artists attempt to copy life, it is a failure:

*In the novel, Dorian's actions are able to change the painting because Basil's original aim was for his art to imitate life- the curse is that this actually happens. Ostensibly, if Basil were a great artist and had not painted a purely mimetic portrait, the tragedies of The Picture of Dorian Gray could have been avoided (Schulz 80).*

At this point Dorian indulges himself into all those pleasurable artefacts to secure his sanity. Drinking the "poisonous" pages of the "yellow-book" Lord Henry has given to him, Dorian smells the "heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages" (110). The book is Dorian's shield against the harsh and ugly realities of life. It is the book of Hedonism which guides Dorian to "worship...senses...passions and sensations" (111) so that he could re-create life away from the Puritanism and learn to "concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment" (115).

Dorian's attachment to this book is so strong that he arranges nine larger paper copies all in different colours to suit his moods (112). Catching the colour and taste of beautiful objects, living the moment and experiencing simple pleasures enable Dorian to "satisfy his intellectual capacity" (116). Even after studying Darwinism "no theory of life seemed to him to be of any importance compared with life itself" (117). Disregarding faculty of reason and overvaluing impressions instead, Dorian is driven into a heavily subjective experience after Sibyl's death. Rejecting the intellectual way of knowing, Dorian starts experimenting with trivial things in a very Faustian manner. Chapter XI is a 17 pages-long narration of all these experiments on how perfumes are made to provide "a mood of the mind" (117), listening to the wild and barbaric music of Tunisians, negroes, Indians and various tribes rather than the harmonious tunes of Beethoven or Schubert, music, collection of the strangest instruments from all around the world, especially from the savage tribes of Chili, Peruvian, Mexican, Amazon tribes and Aztecs (117-118), jewels and various stones with different colours, their magical stories (119), embroideries and tapestries used by classical and religious figures (121), Delhi muslins, Dacca gauzes, Chinese silk, Hungarian laces, Sicilian brocades, Spanish velvets, Georgian coins, Japanese Foukousas, and ecclesiastical vestments (122).

In all these objects of subjective experience, Dorian finds something to stir his imagination to escape from the reality of his portrait which revealed the real degradation and ugliness of life (125). Hence he puts a barrier between the realities of life and himself by using art and aesthetic objects as shields. He lives for the moment and the "madness for pleasure" (155) recalling Pater who claims that "[n]ot the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end" (222).

Identifying himself with literary characters (127), calling Renaissance as “*poisoning by a helmet and a lighted torch*”, Dorian challenges the intellectual knowing “*to realize his conception of the beautiful*” (128). In this respect, Dorian mistakes sensual experience as real as he chooses subjective perception instead of a Kantian mutual agreement between subjective and objective perception. As Wilde’s spokesperson, Dorian’s choice reveals Wilde’s perception of art by following sensations and emotions in order to develop a standard of taste and create new possibilities in life.

However, Waldrep reads Wilde’s engagement with aesthetic objects as a realist background for the novel as he argues they are “*objective sources*” and “*cataloguing of details*” (109). Waldrep relates the representation of detailed objects with Wilde’s contradictory realism (103) and claims that “*He found some of these in sources such as Lefebure’s History of Lace or the handbook to the South Kensington Museum. Like Zola, Wilde was detailing the physical reality of his time, combining externalities of the real world in a list-making, encyclopedic way*” (109). However one can clearly distinguish the aesthetic component of the materials in Wilde’s text. It seems as if Wilde is offering a collection of materials appealing to the senses or trying to aestheticize them for his own sake. Furthermore, it is important to focus on Dorian’s way of perceiving the objective details. It is the way he consumes and seeks pleasure from them which matters since the objects appeal to his senses.

Although Wilde started to study art from the moralistic Victorian art critic John Ruskin as James Joyce claimed (Joyce 57), it appears that Wilde rejected Ruskin’s art as something moral and useful, and followed Pater’s view of art instead. Many critics who studied the aestheticism of Wilde’s writing from different perspectives connect him to Walter Pater. James Sloan Allen claims that Wilde was “*Pater’s most prominent disciple and history’s most legendary devotee of art for art’s sake*” (25). Joseph Carroll argues that the novel bears the “*aesthetic doctrines of Walter Pater*” (287). John Paul Riquelme claims that the novel “*proceeds against the background of Walter Pater’s aesthetic writings, but also against Pater in a strong sense*” (609). The Preface seems to confirm this influence. In the Preface Wilde declares that “*All art is quite useless,*” and “*An artist should create beautiful*” (15) not functional things. Actually this is a criticism of Victorian ideals and conventions that privilege morality and duty over beauty. Waldrep asserts that “[w]ith Pater Wilde developed the idea that England’s culture should become Hellenic” (103) which shows that Wilde’s argument coincides with Pater’s in *The Renaissance*;

*Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity...which come naturally to many of us... art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake (Pater 224).*

In addition, Pater’s ideas parallel Kant’s who claims that the “[b]est way to produce free art is to remove it from all constraint, and thus to change it from work into play” (Kant 85) which will later to be known as Art for Art’s Sake. In this respect, Wilde’s view of art culminates in a rejection of reality and precedes life.

If art is a shield then we can read Dorian’s portrait as his own shield which replaces his soul and conscience. More real than Dorian actually is, the portrait saves Dorian’s physical beauty since art’s quest is for beauty. In this respect Dorian sells his soul to his own portrait with his passionate devotion to it. He believes the portrait “*has a life of its own*” (103) since it has “*revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul*” (105). The portrait’s

connection with reality is further revealed as Dorian orders two men to carry it upstairs to hide. They remark the heaviness of it. Actually it is “*rather heavy*” (107) not only because of the sinful soul of Dorian, but also due to the artist Basil, who has put “*too much of [himself] into it*” (6). Suffering from all the burdens Dorian leaves to his soul, the portrait changes, wrinkles, ages and bleeds upon the sins Dorian commits day after day. The corruption of the portrait is due to the mimetic representation artist Basil chose to perform. The portrait is too real. Indeed, it is a mere representation of life. It is not a “*free beauty*” any more as it is attached to objective reality. It is Basil who wanted to imitate life so he is a failure as an artist and dead. In the Preface Wilde has warned the artist to “*reveal art and conceal the artist*” (3). Yet, Basil refused to do so. In this respect Basil and Sibyl are similar since they understand the difference between mimetic representation and the real thus choose to perform art as lifelike. In the last pages of the novella Dorian stabs his portrait with the “*knife*” that earlier killed its artist (138). As soon as Dorian stabs his own portrait, the mimetic creation, he kills himself and the painting returns back to its perfect artistic form, leaving old and ugly Dorian on the floor. The credibility of the portrait, the life-like representation of Dorian is doomed to perish, as Waldrep argues “*Wilde objected to any realism that slavishly copied certain types of pre-ordained subject matter for reasons of verisimilitude*” (106).

The final appeal of the novella is to separate the aesthetic from the real. The reader is left at the end of the novella with the striking image of a deformed Dorian next to his beautiful portrait. Wilde presents an ugly but real depiction of Dorian while art precedes the lifelike representation. Neither Dorian nor Sibyl or Basil could exist without art. They all suffer from the touch of “[l]ife’s upper hand”, and driven out into the “*wilderness*” as Wilde hinted earlier, was “*the true decadence*” Victorian society was suffering from (Wilde 1961, 14). In Wilde’s world art can survive only if it releases itself from its creator, the artist, and the inspiration of the artist. Wilde’s aesthetic experience seizes the “*free beauty*” in Kantian terms which involves purposiveness without purpose, and makes it the fulcrum of his doctrine. Kantian “*free beauty*” is severed from objective knowledge and perceived subjectively. Wilde’s sensual world of subjective experience contradicts with the realist world of objective experience offered in a mutual coherence in Kant. Wilde imprisons rational experience and embellishes subjective perception in his aesthetics. His only mistake is to ignore the contribution of cognitive and intellectual faculties as experimented in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Finally, Wilde’s interpretation of Kant influences his aesthetic doctrine, art for art’s sake, which offers an intense aesthetic experience to the nineteenth century, embracing formalism by the twentieth century.

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